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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5257

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2991

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2856

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3501

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3591

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000691

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2019

TAGS: KIRF PGOV SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: DESPITE REGISTRATION, KRISHNA SOCIETY HINDERED BY RESTRICTIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Richard M. Miles.

Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. Two leaders of the Society for Krishna Consciousness described the registered religious group's situation in generally positive terms, but mentioned many restrictions and uncertainties that hinder the group from attracting new members and becoming better established. Members are able to travel abroad without hindrance, but the group has not been able to invite foreign Krishna officials to Turkmenistan. Religious literature is available, but in restricted quantities that do not allow for outreach. The group rents space for its temple in the home of a member, but does not think it would be possible to own its own facility. Within the bounds of its authorized activities, the Ashgabat group faces no difficulties, but outside Ashgabat, Krishna Society members face greater obstacles. Even a question as basic as the validity of the group's registration in provinces is a point of contention among different government officials. Although the group is registered and its members meet without hindrance, the various restrictions force the Krishna Society to maintain an extremely low profile. Krishna leaders expressed willingness to be patient and to pursue a gradual approach to expanding their outreach. END SUMMARY.

THE KRISHNA TEMPLE: OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

¶12. (C) On June 2, poloff met with two leaders of the Turkmenistan branch of the Society for Krishna Consciousness, Ashgabat-based Yazdurdy Sahedov and Mary-based Vitaliy Efremovtsev, aka Varshana das. The meeting took place at the Krishna Society's Ashgabat temple. The large room, sparsely furnished with a few shrines, is located in the home of one of its members in an older quarter of Ashgabat, at the end of a maze-like pattern of narrow streets. There was nothing on the outside of the house to indicate that it was a temple. The Krishna Society has rented the premises since 1998.

¶13. (C) The group has been registered since 2004, following failed attempts to obtain registration in 1993 and 1998. By 2000, the group could not conduct any activities. Its temple was raided and all the contents were seized. In Ashgabat, the group has not encountered any problems for the past five years. Efremovtsev said there is social pressure on some

members to the point that they are "secret believers" who conceal their beliefs and do not come to the temple. If their beliefs become known at the workplace, for instance, they are subject to subtle pressure in the form of discussions.

¶4. (C) Concerning ownership of a temple property, Efremovtsev said it was his understanding that they could not buy land for a temple. The group was not even trying. Nevertheless, he said they need their own land and building, "they cannot stay in their rented space forever." The group is only allowed to gather for worship at its temple and at designated times. Officially, only group members are allowed to attend the group's gatherings. However, Efremovtsev said non-members also attend, with the knowledge of government officials who turn a blind eye to the violation. They are mostly friends of current members. While Krishna Society members cannot proselytize on the street, Efremovtsev said they have not felt pressure from the government since 2004. He suggested that it was better for the group to expand its activities gradually so that the government is comfortable with what they are doing. He travels freely to different cities, but only meets with individuals, not with big groups.

¶5. (C) It has not been possible for the group to invite foreign guests. They tried twice without success to invite Krishna Society officials based in the United States who cover Central Asia, but could not obtain approval from the government. The group's members have no obstacles in traveling abroad. This year ten have already traveled to

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India.

#### LIMITS ON QUANTITY OF LITERATURE RESTRICT OUTREACH

¶6. (C) In 2004, when the group was registered, the national Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) reviewed and approved the group's literature, although Efremovtsev doubted that anyone at the CRA had actually read the materials. The quantity of printed materials that they were allowed to import was based on the number of members. Efremovtsev said it is hard to attract new members when there is no material to give them. He recounted that in 2006, when a group of six returned from India, all 45 books that they brought back with them were seized at the airport. During the past year, however, the luggage of group members coming individually from India was not checked closely at the airport and they were able to bring materials with them. Four Krishna writings have been translated into Turkmen and another 15 are available in Russian. Prior to 2000, the group distributed literature, but since then has not been able to obtain copies to hand out.

¶7. (C) In dealing with government officials, Efremovtsev indicated that they show the Krishna members some respect and "treat them like people," in contrast with the past. At the same time, he thought officials do not want "too much dialogue." On May 8, representatives from the local level CRA in Ashgabat accepted an invitation to come to the Krishna temple to celebrate a holiday.

#### SIZABLE MARY GROUP LACKS A TEMPLE

¶8. (C) Krishna believers outside Ashgabat face more obstacles. The Krishna Society has filials in Mary and Turkmenabat. The Mary group is the largest in Turkmenistan with 60 regular participants, followed by Ashgabat's 50 members. Still, the Mary group has not been able to obtain permission from local authorities to rent a worship space. The group currently meets in private homes, but space constraints make that inconvenient. Initially, Mary's deputy mayor told Efremovtsev that the Society's registration was not valid in Mary. Efremovtsev confirmed with Ministry of Justice (MOJ) officials that the registration was valid nationally, not just in Ashgabat. Subsequently, when

Efremovtsev brought a lease to the mayor's office for approval, the deputy mayor said they need a certificate showing that the group is registered. The MOJ refused to issue a certificate, saying the mayor's office should send a written inquiry to the MOJ. Efremovtsev is waiting for word from the Mary mayor's office that the documentation was obtained. Despite the run-around and difficulties, he expected that the group will have a place to meet in Mary within six months. He said the problem with the local registration "requirement" is that there is no protocol or procedure. The MOJ takes the position that only national registration is necessary for a group to gather anywhere in the country. He joked that, when the officials at the mayor's office see him coming, "they close the doors and run."

#### RELIGIOUS GROUPS: STRENGTH IN UNITY

19. (C) In order to improve the situation of minority religious groups, Efremovtsov suggested that the groups could form an informal coalition that would cooperate and present issues of common concern, such as property ownership or local registration requirements. He proposed that they could send joint letters to the president, noting that if the groups could get beyond competition and unite, "they would not be minorities, but rather a force." He thought the chance of a successful roundtable including government officials was slim. They would only attend if they had permission from the top, which he thought would be unlikely. In dealing with government officials, "if the top level does not give approval, nothing gets done." He said officials are not free to decide such matters for themselves.

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110. (C) COMMENT: As is clearly demonstrated by the experiences of the Krishna Society (and other registered minority religious groups), the restrictions imposed by the government limit their scope of activity and force them to maintain a low profile. In that sense, registration for these groups, while an important step that allows them to meet together legally, is still only one hurdle on the path to obtaining freedom to practice their religious beliefs. The current system still allows arbitrary review of groups' activities with no certainty about what is allowed. This reinforces the belief among many religious leaders that, in fact, any request, for example, to import literature, to host foreign religious leaders, to own church property, to hold special meetings, etc., would be denied. The challenge is how to encourage the government to tolerate a more permissive environment that would allow these groups to operate more freely. END COMMENT.

MILES